

**THE ONTOLOGICAL
ARCHETYPE OF ABRAHAM
VAN HELSING**

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The figure of Professor Abraham Van Helsing, as introduced in Bram Stoker's seminal 1897 novel *Dracula*, stands as one of the most enduring and complex archetypes in the canon of Gothic literature. Far more than a mere antagonist to the vampiric Count, Van Helsing represents a pivotal epistemological bridge between the waning superstitions of the medieval past and the aggressive, often terrifying, scientific rationalism of the late Victorian era.¹ He is a character of contradictions: a man of science who prescribes Host wafers and garlic; a "brain doctor" who speaks in broken, idiosyncratic English; and a Dutchman inserted into a narrative dominated by British and Transylvanian sensibilities.

The question of Van Helsing's "true" identity—the real-world inspiration behind the fictional persona—is not merely a matter of literary trivia. It is a profound investigation into the sources of Stoker's creative process and the intellectual climate of the *fin de siècle*. This inquiry is driven by Stoker's own assertion, made in a July 1897 interview with Jane Stoddart for the *British Weekly*, that the character of the Amsterdam professor was "founded on a real character".³ This deliberate admission has sparked over a century of scholarly detective work, leading researchers to examine the lives of Dutch hypnotists, Prussian pastors, Austrian court physicians, and Oxford philologists.

This report provides an exhaustive analysis of the candidates for the "real" Van Helsing, examining the historical evidence, the literary clues buried in Stoker's notes, and the thematic necessities that likely drove the character's evolution. By synthesizing data from Stoker's archives with biographical

details of the proposed models—including Georg Andreas Helwing, Albert van Renterghem, Frederik van Eeden, and Max Müller—we arrive at a nuanced understanding of Van Helsing not as a portrait of a single man, but as a composite entity constructed to resolve the metaphysical tensions of his time.

I. The Stokerian Nexus: Genesis in the Archives

To understand the identity of Abraham Van Helsing, one must first deconstruct the process of his creation. The character did not spring fully formed into the narrative; rather, he evolved through a series of drafts and conceptual shifts that mirror Stoker's own deepening research into vampire folklore and contemporary science.

The "Max Windshoeffel" Phase and the German Connection

The most definitive evidence regarding the character's origins lies in Stoker's personal working notes, which were rediscovered and acquired by the Rosenbach Museum and Library in Philadelphia in 1970.⁶ These notes, which document seven years of obsessive research, reveal that the character we know as the Dutch polymath began his literary life as a German historian.⁷

In Stoker's early "Historiae Personae" sheets, the role of the expert advisor was assigned to a character named "Max Windshoeffel".⁷ This initial conception aligns with a prevalent Victorian literary trope: the "German Professor" as a repository of obscure, often metaphysical, knowledge.⁹ The choice

of nationality was likely influenced by the fact that much of the foundational scholarship on vampirism available to Stoker—such as the works of Ossenfelder, Bürger, and Goethe—was written in German.¹⁰

However, as the novel developed, Stoker made the critical decision to alter the character's nationality from German to Dutch and his name from Max Windshoeffel to Abraham Van Helsing.⁷ This shift is significant for several reasons. First, it distanced the character from the specific "Germanic" tradition of the vampire (the *Nachtzehrer* or *Blutsauger*) and aligned him with the broader, more cosmopolitan intellectualism associated with the Netherlands. Second, the name change to "Abraham" invokes a biblical patriarch, a father figure who leads his people against a spiritual plague, contrasting with the more generic "Max".⁷

Despite the name change, traces of the original "Max" remain in the final text. The character's syntax, often criticized as "bumbling" or inauthentic, bears the hallmarks of literal translation from German grammatical structures rather than Dutch, a remnant of the Windshoeffel phase that Stoker never fully excised.²

The 1897 "Real Character" Admission

The primary catalyst for the search for a real-life Van Helsing is Stoker's explicit claim of a living model. In the interview with Jane Stoddart, Stoker stated: "Mr. Stoker told me that van Helsing is founded on a real character".⁵ He repeated this assertion in the preface to the Swedish and Icelandic editions of *Dracula* (published as *Makt Myrkranna*), where he wrote from an in-universe perspective that "the highly regarded sci-

entist... may likewise be too famous throughout the educated world for his real name... to remain hidden".¹¹

This creates a paradox: Stoker claims the character is based on a real person, yet the "Max Windshoeffel" notes suggest a fictional construct that evolved over time. The solution likely lies in a synthesis: Stoker began with a fictional archetype (Windshoeffel) and then, upon encountering a specific real-world individual or individuals, grafted their personality and credentials onto the existing framework, necessitating the change to "Van Helsing."

II. The Dutch Psychiatrists: The Case for Van Renterghem and Van Eeden

Among the myriad candidates proposed by literary historians, the strongest circumstantial case exists for two Dutch contemporaries of Stoker: Dr. Albert Willem van Renterghem (1845–1939) and Dr. Frederik van Eeden (1860–1932).³ This theory, championed by researcher Hans Corneel de Roos and supported by the Van Renterghem family, posits that Stoker modeled his "brain doctor" on the founders of the Amsterdam clinic for hypnotic suggestion.³

The Amsterdam Clinic and the Science of Hypnosis

In 1887, Van Renterghem and Van Eeden established a groundbreaking medical practice in Amsterdam dedicated to psychotherapy and hypnotism.¹² At this time, hypnosis was transitioning from the realm of stage magic and "mesmerism" to legitimate clinical practice, largely due to the work of the Nancy School in France.⁴

The relevance of this to *Dracula* cannot be overstated. Van Helsing is not merely a vampire hunter; he is a master of the mind. His most critical contribution to the hunt is not the stake, but the hypnotic trance he induces in Mina Harker to track Dracula's movements across the sea.³ This plot device requires a "doctor of the brain" who is also willing to engage with the "occult" fringes of science—exactly the position occupied by Van Renterghem and Van Eeden.

The Network of Influence

While no direct letters between Stoker and the Dutch doctors have been found, the degrees of separation are virtually non-existent. Stoker was the business manager for Henry Irving and a key figure in London's cultural elite. His social circle overlapped significantly with the professional network of the Amsterdam clinic:

1. **Frederic Myers:** The secretary of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was a close friend of Stoker and a frequent visitor to the Amsterdam clinic to observe the doctors' work.⁴ Stoker was fascinated by the SPR and likely received detailed reports of the Dutch experiments through Myers.
2. **Edmund Gosse:** A prominent literary critic and friend of Stoker, Gosse hosted Frederik van Eeden in London.⁴
3. **William Heinemann:** Stoker's publisher and close friend also published the English translation of Van Eeden's literary work, *De Kleine Johannes*.⁴

4. **Charles Lloyd Tuckey:** A British physician who visited the Amsterdam clinic and was a mutual acquaintance of Stoker.⁴

The Grandmother’s Testimony

The most direct link comes from Tonny van Renterghem, the grandson of Albert. In his autobiography, Tonny claimed that his grandmother (Albert’s wife) explicitly told him that Bram Stoker had known her husband and used him as the model for Van Helsing.³ While family oral history must be treated with caution, this specific claim aligns perfectly with the timeline of Stoker’s writing and the shift in the character’s nationality from German to Dutch.

Comparative Analysis: The Psychiatrists vs. Van Helsing

The following table illustrates the convergence of traits between the fictional professor and the Dutch doctors:

Feature	Abraham Van Helsing	Albert van Renterghem
Nationality	Dutch	Dutch
Profession	MD, Philosopher, Scientist	Psychiatrist, Hypnotherapist
Specialization	"The brain and all that belongs to him"	Hypnotic Suggestion / Psychotherapy
Titles	MD, D.Ph., D.Litt.	MD

Personality	Eccentric, authoritative, "King Laugh"	Clinical pioneer, authoritative
Connection to Stoker	N/A	Alleged direct acquaintance (Grandmother's claim)

The character of Van Helsing appears to be a composite of these two men: possessing the clinical authority and hypnotic expertise of Van Renterghem, and the literary, philosophical depth (the "D.Litt.") of Van Eeden.¹³

III. The Prussian Demonologist: Georg Andreas Helwing

While the Dutch psychiatrists provide the professional veneer and nationality for Van Helsing, they lack one critical element: experience with vampires. For this aspect of the character—the man who strides into a plague-ridden village to decapitate corpses—we must look to the 18th century and the figure of Georg Andreas Helwing.¹³

The Pastor of Angerburg

Georg Andreas Helwing (1666–1748) was a Lutheran pastor and a renowned botanist living in Angerburg, Prussia (modern Węgorzewo, Poland).¹³ Like Van Helsing, Helwing was a man of immense learning, having studied theology and philosophy at Königsberg, Wittenberg, Leipzig, and Jena.¹³ He was a "man of letters" in the truest sense, corresponding

with the scientific elite of Europe while ministering to a rural congregation deeply steeped in Slavic folklore.

The 1710 Harsz Vampire Incident

The most chilling parallel between Helwing and Van Helsing is found in Helwing's own accounts of the bubonic plague epidemic of 1710. In the village of Harsz, the terrified populace believed the plague was being spread by an *upierz* (vampire) devouring its own burial shroud.¹³

Helwing recorded the gruesome ritual undertaken by the villagers:

1. **Exhumation:** The villagers dug up corpses looking for signs of "life" (undecayed flesh, blood in the mouth).
2. **Mutilation:** Failing to find a clear culprit, they "made" one by lacerating a corpse to resemble a feeding vampire.
3. **The Ritual:** In a solemn atmosphere, singing songs for the dead, they decapitated the corpse with a spade and threw the body back into the grave along with a living dog.¹³

This scene bears a haunting resemblance to the climax of the Lucy Westenra arc in *Dracula*, where Van Helsing leads the suitors to the graveyard to decapitate the "Bloofer Lady." Helwing, like Van Helsing, stood at the intersection of this horror, acting as the educated observer documenting the collision of death and superstition.

The Stoker Connection

Stoker's research for *Dracula* was incredibly thorough, involving the study of travelogues, medical treatises, and folklore collections at the British Museum.⁶ It is highly probable that he encountered accounts of the Prussian vampire epidemics, potentially even Helwing's own writings or citations of them in later German works. The character of Van Helsing, who knows exactly how to treat the vampire's severed head and heart, reflects the specific, ritualistic knowledge documented by men like Helwing.

IV. The Rationalist Hunter: Gerard van Swieten

If Helwing represents the "participant-observer" of vampire folklore, Gerard van Swieten represents the state-sanctioned "eradicator." As the personal physician to Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, Van Swieten (1700–1772) is arguably the most famous historical "vampire hunter," though his methods were diametrically opposed to Van Helsing's.¹⁴

The Anti-Vampire Crusader

In the mid-18th century, a "vampire panic" swept through the Austrian borderlands (Serbia, Moravia, Silesia). Reports of walking corpses reached the imperial court in Vienna. In response, Empress Maria Theresa dispatched Van Swieten to investigate.¹⁰

Van Swieten's conclusion, published in his 1768 treatise *Abhandlung des Daseyns der Gespenster* ("Treatise on the Existence of Ghosts"), was that vampires did not exist. He argued that the phenomena were caused by natural decomposition

processes, soil conditions, and mass hysteria.¹⁴ Based on his report, Maria Theresa passed laws prohibiting the opening of graves and the desecration of bodies—effectively “killing” the vampire through legislation and science.¹⁰

The Inversion of the Archetype

Stoker was almost certainly aware of Van Swieten. The physician is a titan in the history of vampire folklore, and Stoker’s notes indicate deep reading on the subject.³ However, Stoker performs a fascinating literary inversion. He takes the *figure* of Van Swieten—the authoritative, Dutch-born imperial expert sent to the borders of civilization—but flips his *philosophy*.

Where Van Swieten used science to disprove the supernatural, Van Helsing uses science to *prove* it. Van Swieten dismissed the “ignorance” of the peasants; Van Helsing embraces it, telling Dr. Seward that “it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain”.² Van Helsing is, in essence, a Romantic reimagining of Van Swieten: what if the rationalist doctor had arrived in the village and found that the peasants were right?

Trait	Gerard van Swieten	
Origin	Dutch (Leiden)	
Role	Imperial Physician / Investigator	
Approach	Enlightenment Rationalism	

Objective	Eradicate superstition
Legacy	Ban on grave desecration

V. The Oxford Philologist: The Max Müller Hypothesis

Another compelling candidate, particularly regarding the character's name and academic stature, is Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), the German-born Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford.³

The "Max" Connection

As previously noted, Stoker's original name for the character was "Max Windshoeffel." Max Müller was one of the most famous academics in Victorian England, a celebrity scholar known for his work on Eastern religions and languages.³ The retention of the name "Max" in the drafts points directly to Müller as a conceptual model.

Stoker's Notes and Linguistic Expertise

Stoker's research notes contain references to the linguistic relationships between the Finnish and Hungarian languages, a topic that falls squarely within Müller's area of expertise.³ Furthermore, Van Helsing's polymathic nature—his ability to speak on everything from medicine to Transylvanian history—mirrors Müller's vast intellectual range.

There is also a direct personal link: Müller corresponded with Henry Irving regarding the production of *Faust*, placing him within the immediate orbit of the Lyceum Theatre.³ The description of Van Helsing in the Swedish preface as a scientist

"too famous... for his real name to remain hidden" ¹¹ fits Müller, whose fame in the late 19th century was comparable to that of a modern public intellectual.

VI. The Red Herring: Ármín Vámbéry

For decades, literary consensus held that Ármín Vámbéry, the Hungarian traveler and Orientalist, was the primary inspiration for Van Helsing. This theory was fueled by a line in the novel where Van Helsing refers to his "friend Arminius, of Buda-Pesth University".⁹

Deconstructing the Myth

While Stoker and Vámbéry met in London (in 1890 and 1892) and Stoker mentions him in his *Reminiscences*, the "Vámbéry as Van Helsing" theory collapses under scrutiny of the Rosenbach notes.⁹

1. **Absence in Notes:** Stoker's extensive notes for *Dracula* do not mention Vámbéry in the character sketches or the plot outlines.⁹
2. **The "Friend" Distinction:** By explicitly naming "Arminius" as a separate character (a friend of Van Helsing's) within the text, Stoker effectively precludes him from *being* Van Helsing. The character relies on Arminius for information, distinguishing the source from the actor.⁹
3. **Lack of Medical Background:** Vámbéry was a linguist and explorer, not a doctor. He lacked the medical

and metaphysical credentials that are central to Van Helsing's role as a physician-philosopher.³

The recent suggestion in Dacre Stoker's novel *Dracul* that Vámbéry and Van Helsing are the same person ¹⁷ is a compelling narrative device for a prequel but represents a retroactive continuity change rather than historical fact based on Bram Stoker's original intent.

VII. Literary Lineage: The Shadow of Sheridan Le Fanu

Abraham Van Helsing did not emerge solely from real-life inspirations; he is also the literary descendant of characters created by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, the Irish master of the Gothic who heavily influenced Stoker.¹⁷

Dr. Martin Hesselius: The Occult Detective

In Le Fanu's collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), the stories are framed as the case notes of Dr. Martin Hesselius. Hesselius is a "medical philosopher" who treats patients suffering from supernatural afflictions (such as the demon monkey in "Green Tea").²¹ He treats the supernatural as a pathology, a disease of the spiritual constitution. This clinical detachment in the face of the impossible is the direct blueprint for Van Helsing's "diagnosis" of Lucy Westenra.

Baron Vordenburg: The Vampire Expert

In Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla*, the character of Baron Vordenburg serves as the specialist who arrives to dispense the

critical lore required to kill the vampire.¹¹ Vordenburg is described as a man who has "read all the great and little works" on the subject and "extracted a system of principles"—phrasing that Stoker echoes in Van Helsing's speeches about the "nosferatu".¹¹

Van Helsing is essentially a fusion of Hesselius and Vordenburg: he possesses Hesselius's medical-psychological framework and Vordenburg's specific anti-vampire toolkit.

VIII. The Character's Internal Logic: Medicine, Metaphysics, and Titles

The "realness" of Van Helsing is further established by the specific titles and methods Stoker assigns him, which reflect the cutting-edge anxieties of the 1890s.

The Significance of the Titles

Van Helsing is introduced as "Abraham Van Helsing, M.D., D.Ph., D.Litt., etc., etc.". ¹¹ This trine of degrees is structural to the novel's philosophy:

- **M.D. (Body):** Enables him to perform the blood transfusions, a procedure that was medically avant-garde and culturally terrifying in 1897.⁶
- **D.Ph. (Mind/Soul):** Provides the metaphysical framework to accept the existence of the vampire.
- **D.Litt. (History):** Allows him to access the "old lore" necessary to defeat the threat.

Blood and Hysteria

Van Helsing is not a stoic hero; he is emotionally volatile. He succumbs to a "hysterical fit" of laughing and crying after Lucy's funeral, shocking Dr. Seward.⁴ This "King Laugh" moment is often overlooked in adaptations but is crucial to the character's realism. It reflects the Victorian understanding of "hysteria" and "nervous exhaustion," conditions that psychiatrists like Van Renterghem were treating in Amsterdam.⁴ It humanizes the superman, showing the immense psychological toll of confronting the chaotic irrationality of the vampire.

IX. Legacy and Lineage: The Fictional Afterlife

The ambiguity of Van Helsing's "true" identity has allowed the character to spawn a massive fictional lineage that often eclipses the original novel.

The Family Mythos

In *Dracula*, Van Helsing mentions a wife who is insane ("dead to me") and a son who died.²⁴ This tragic backstory implies the end of his line. However, the cultural need for a "vampire hunter" archetype has led to the invention of descendants in almost every subsequent medium.

- **Hammer Horror:** Peter Cushing's Van Helsing has a granddaughter in *Dracula A.D. 1972*.¹¹
- **Modern Media:** The 2004 film *Van Helsing* and the 2016 TV series *Van Helsing* reimagine the lineage as a warrior caste.¹⁷

- **Subversions:** Fred Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape* (1975) reimagines the events from Dracula's perspective, painting Van Helsing not as a hero but as a "bungling, narrow-minded prude" and a "thug" who bullies the other characters.²⁶ This revisionist take highlights the inherent fanaticism in Van Helsing's character—a trait that, in the original text, is presented as necessary zeal but can easily be read as obsession.

X. Conclusion: The Composite Savior

The search for the singular "true identity" of Abraham Van Helsing ultimately reveals that no such single individual exists. Instead, Van Helsing is a brilliant *bricolage*—a composite figure constructed from the most compelling scientific, historical, and literary elements of the late 19th century.

Bram Stoker, the consummate researcher and theatrical manager, understood the power of verisimilitude. To make his vampire monster believable, he needed a monster hunter who felt equally real.

- From **Dr. Albert van Renterghem** and **Dr. Frederik van Eeden**, he drew the "brain doctor" persona, the Dutch nationality, and the use of hypnotic suggestion.
- From **Georg Andreas Helwing**, he drew the specific, gritty details of exhumation and decapitation in the face of a plague.

- From **Gerard van Swieten**, he drew the structural role of the imperial expert, while inverting his skepticism.
- From **Max Müller**, he drew the academic celebrity and the original name "Max."
- From **Le Fanu**, he drew the literary form of the occult detective.

Stoker's claim that Van Helsing was "founded on a real character" was likely a reference to Van Renterghem or Van Eeden, given the proximity of their social circles and the specific medical details used. However, the *soul* of the character—the man who can bridge the gap between the blood transfusion and the crucifix—is a purely Stokerian invention. Van Helsing is the embodiment of the Victorian desire to reconcile their rapidly advancing science with the ancient fears that still lingered in the dark. He is the "real" character who proves that even in an age of electric lights and typewriters, there is still a need for old men with open minds and sharp stakes.

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